

American Indian Studies for Educators

American Indian Studies for Educators: Integrating Indian Education for All

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Abstract

This article examines whether American Indian Studies for Educators, an online graduate level course, offers students background knowledge that encourages the integration of Montana's Indian Education for All mandate.

“I see teachers thinking they’re doing a lot for us by having a week on Indians – ‘we’re going to do an Indian unit’ – especially before Thanksgiving – ‘and we’re going to make a little headband with feathers and everyone is going to understand what it is to be Indian.’ That’s ridiculous.”

Nola Lodge – Oneida (Culture and School Success, 1999, p. 6.3)

Unfortunately, this was and still is a reality in many classrooms. In-service and pre-service teachers are too often not prepared or committed to assuring that their students are given the opportunity to learn about the rich heritage of their American Indian neighbors and peers. In 1972, language specific to honoring and recognizing American Indians was written into the Montana Constitution. “The state recognizes the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity” (Indian Education for All, 2000, p. 1).

In 1999 Montana’s passage of MCA 20-1-501, Indian Education for All, was a step to re-energize Indian Education. Under this mandate, it is stated that:

- (a) every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner;
- (b) every educational agency and all educational personnel will work cooperatively with Montana tribes or those tribes that are in close proximity, when providing instruction or

when implementing an educational goal or adopting a rule related to the education of each Montana citizen, to include information specific to the cultural heritage and contemporary contributions of American Indians, with particular emphasis on Montana Indian Tribal groups and governments ; and (c) all school personnel should have an understanding and awareness of Indian tribes to help them relate effectively with Indian students and parents, that educational personnel provide means by which school personnel will gain an understanding of and appreciation for the American Indian people (McCluskey, 2002, p. 41).

Even though this language was documented several years ago, little has been done to fulfill its intended commitment and integrate it into educational agencies, including public schools. Successful implementation of Indian Education for All is dependant upon the entire educational community, not just districts with high populations of American Indians. The purpose of this article was to determine whether an online course called American Indian Studies for Educators offered students appropriate background knowledge that encouraged integration of Montana's Indian Education for All mandate. Mandate, in this instance, denotes a formal order handed down by the Montana legislature. As used in the earlier quote, the following definitions apply: American Indian studies means instruction pertaining to the history, traditions, values, beliefs, customs, ethics and contemporary affairs of American Indians, particularly Indian tribal groups in Montana. Instruction means a formal course of study or class, developed with the advice and assistance of Indian people, that is offered separately or that is integrated into existing accreditation standards (Indian Education for All, 2000).

Prior research indicates that Indian students still attend schools where they do not see themselves valued in the classroom, in policies, or the curriculum; and, non-Indian students still

do not learn about their Indian peers with whom they will continue to live among and work with throughout their lives (McCulloch, 2003). The specific constitutional language outlining the inclusion of American Indian heritage in education goals has not been turned into action. Unfortunately, these laws pertaining to Indian education have been established for more than 30 years, but are still struggling for a place in public schools (Whitford, 2005).

### Course Development

There is a concern in Montana that is evident: Implementation of Indian Education for All is not moving forward as progressively as it should. Those involved in the educational community are not disseminating or receiving the professional development that is needed to carry out the mandate in a responsible manner (Whitford, 2005).

A common solution in many states is to require a college course related to whatever it is the state deems important. Native American studies courses are offered at numerous universities around the country, but rarely as a course designed specifically for teachers. With this in mind, the idea for a distance delivered, graduate level course called American Indian Studies for Educators was born.

During the development process, I initially met with several experts in Native American Studies and from the Office of Public Instruction, for direction and guidance. Several months were needed to synthesize, compile, and read the abundance of material gathered from those experts. After developing the rough draft, it was sent to Indian education specialists around the state, encouraging feedback. Dr. Henrietta Mann, special assistant to the President and Dulce Whitford, an Indian education specialist, responded with suggestions and comments that became central components of the course. After a final edit and review, the course was approved by Montana State University's new course approval process. The topics covered throughout the texts and the course include:

Topic #1 - Basic Background and Assumptions

Topic #2 – Twelve Tribes of Montana/Tribes of South Dakota/Tribe of Interest

Topic #3 – Tensions Created by Euro-Americans

Topic #4 – Reservations, a New Way of Survival

Topic #5 – Oppression

Topic #6 – Native Languages

Topic #7 – Portrayal of American Indians in Current Curriculum/Texts

Topic #8 – History of and Legislative Issues Regarding Indian Education

Topic #9 – Indian Learning and Teaching Styles

Topic #10 – Literacy

Topic #11 – School and Community Relations

The students who will likely take the course are teachers looking for professional development or recertification credits, master's seeking students who take it as an elective, or those who deem it interesting.

#### Methods

My development and teaching of American Indian Studies for Educators happened by chance. I had previously taught for an online, alternative certification program called Northern Plains Transition to Teaching (NPTT); a program where students with bachelor's degrees can become certified to teach while also earning a master's degree. The NPTT grant required an elective course as an option for their candidates. With my expertise in curriculum design and online course development, I was asked to put together an Indian education course for teachers. Thus, I spent the 2004-2005 school year developing a course that would meet the needs of NPTT students while fulfilling the requirements of Montana's Indian Education for All mandate.

The first time I taught the American Indian Studies for Educators course was the summer of 2005. As a participant observer in the course I used three methods to collect data: personal comments, a questionnaire, and artifacts. Structured and unstructured postings and comments by the students were a primary source of data. Postings in an online course are how students initially communicate, giving personal views or reflections. Comments are then made by other students in the class regarding the original posting. Postings and discussions are initiated by someone who is answering a specific question from the course syllabus or commenting on her/his readings. Postings and discussions are very similar to discussions in a traditional face to face course.

A questionnaire was given the final week of class as a concluding assignment. The three questions included information regarding current school integration practices and improvement ideas related to American Indian students. I also gathered artifacts, after the course had taken place; when students were teaching in their classrooms or were on the job. These artifacts included unit plans, lesson plans from their classes, and/or lesson descriptions.

### Participants

During the summer of 2005, 19 students enrolled in initial American Indian Studies for Educators course. Sixteen of these students were teachers, four were Native American, and eight had never taken an online course. Nine students were taking it as an elective course for the NPTT program, one person was taking the course as a component of her doctoral program, two were interested in the topic and the final seven were asked by their school districts to take the course in order to utilize the information for the implementation of Indian Education for All in their districts. Success of the course was determined by students' integration of the Indian Education for All state mandate as discussed in the course content.

## Findings

The formally stated goal for American Indian Studies for Educators was designed to support the Board of Regents of the Montana University System and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education in their commitment to the obligations and responsibilities with regard to Indian education mandated by Article X of the Montana Constitution, MCA 20-1-501ff, and Board of Regents Policy 1902. It was designed to equip new and practicing teachers with the skill, knowledge, and dispositions to meet the MCA 20-1-501, Indian Education for All, mandate. To address validity and reliability of my findings I utilized three data collection techniques: postings and discussions, a questionnaire, and artifacts from students' actual teaching or work experiences. While utilizing the triangulation procedure, one theme specifically, was highlighted while addressing the success of the course, integration of Indian Education for All. To shed light on the theme, I will focus on each data collection technique, individually.

### Integration of Indian Education for All

#### *Postings and Discussions*

From their postings and discussions most students recognized how little they were actually integrating Indian culture and history into their curriculum. As one student explained, "I am taking this course to help my school develop curriculum for the Indian Education for All mandate, something we aren't currently doing." During the postings and discussions of the topic *Tensions Created by Euro-Americans*, all students developed and shared very specific ideas and lists of approaches they would utilize to integrate Indian Education for All in their curriculum.

Several students joined the course to gain knowledge and background regarding American Indians and their culture, and became much more familiar by researching a local tribe and attending an event. Students were encouraged to attend an event relevant to the tribe they were

studying. If they were able to fulfill this request, it became the most valuable aspect of the course.

The best thing I did for my view and understanding of the American Indian was to attend the Lewis and Clark Expedition celebration at the Gallatin County Fairgrounds. At this I listened to lectures on the American Indians by American Indians, and was also able to conduct interviews of these speakers. It was an incredible education and solidified the lessons that we had this semester.

Another wrote,

My family and I attended the opening ceremonies for the Traditional Games at the fairgrounds. It was an amazing experience. Traditional drummers played and sang at the Grand Entrance as each tribe entered the arena....Several prayers were spoken in English, Crow, and Sioux to keep all participants safe and healthy during the games. For the next two days I took my children to the fairgrounds where they learned about the games and were allowed to play...they had an absolute blast!

Not only did several people take the course to learn more about Native Americans, but they also took it to better meet the needs of their diverse students. One student stated,

I am much more aware of the cultures and needs in my classroom since I took this class. I do not have American Indian students in my classroom, but it is important to have this information when I do need it. It's also not a bad idea to remember every student has a culture of his/her own, so being aware of them all is good.

Regarding another curriculum discussion, one teacher wrote,

I came into this class with a need for information pertaining to the teaching of Native American students and resources to carry out that charge. I am happy to say that the texts

were insightful and the web sites and associated links have given me a great first step in setting up a curriculum for the school district. During our Social Studies curriculum meetings this summer, I was able to share much of this information with elementary and middle school teachers. We set about to determine how best to apply this information to the Montana Social Studies Standards.

Another wrote,

I learned much more than I thought I would. It was extremely helpful reading the discussions from other classmates. The assignments that have helped me in my field were writing the lesson plans and coming up with ideas of how to integrate Native American culture into my presentations.

And a history teacher shared this, “The course will help me in my World Geography class for teaching acceptance of other cultures and as a way for my students to research other cultures around the world.”

### *Questionnaire*

Lesson integration and curriculum development were key topics when answering the questionnaire. Utilizing answers from the first question, what are you doing in your classrooms to meet the needs of Native American students and their culture; the teachers overwhelmingly discussed the importance of Indian education integration. One teacher wrote,

As a high school science teacher, there are many opportunities to integrate Native American culture into the curriculum. Since the American Indian has lived holistically with the natural environment their entire lives, various aspects of their lives relate to all areas of science.

A college student wrote of her university,

I was in a class last semester where we developed on-line resources that teachers could access from our server. Pre-service and in-service teachers were encouraged by faculty to design materials with Indian Education for All in mind.

Another teacher wrote, “At the school and district level, significance must be placed on the creating of curricula, materials, and assessment activities matching the learning strengths of Native American students.”

From the questionnaire most students discussed the importance of studying American Indian culture and meeting the needs of diverse students. One teacher wrote, “We must somehow tie our common goals to Native heritage in some form or another in order for our educational system to be affective in the development of and educating an American Indian society.” A teacher who works at an at-risk school wrote,

This year I have developed a partnership of communication and sharing with the elders of several reservations. Also, tribal members have returned to the reservation as teachers enlisting the critical support of the elders to bring the parents into their students’ education. A teacher who works at a small private school wrote, “I do think many individual teachers work at making the curriculum meaningful to students, but I would not say this is a universal teaching approach.”

Most students from the course felt that Indian Education for All is important, but a few are still caught between what should be done and what actually is being done. One teacher wrote, “We do not have a large Native population (one student). The school does not have an American Indian curriculum in place, but we are sensitive to the needs of this student.” A teacher from a small southwestern school in Montana stated, “...we do not have an American Indian

population....However, I do see the need to consider what schools are doing to improve the success and meet the needs of American Indian students..."

### *Artifacts*

Several students in the course supplied artifacts that were explanations of what was taking place in their classroom or school district regarding Indian Education for All implementation. Some supplied actual lesson or unit plans. Many respondents were integrating Indian Education for all in their districts or classrooms. "I have used a great lesson I designed for kindergarten. It includes a field trip to buffalo jump state park. I also include information on the impact of Spaniards on Native Americans in my middle school lessons." Others included lesson plans addressing perimeter and area in relation to a medicine wheel, effects of time and change on historical, present and future perspectives and relationships of Montana Indian tribes, beading, Native American themes in art projects, adding additional literature in English courses...and the list goes on.

While reviewing the artifacts, I came across several examples where the teachers mentioned specifically what they were integrating in their class. "I had Jewel Gopher come in during Native American see as a guest speaker and talk about games. The students love the stick game and ask to play it almost weekly." One teacher is collaborating with another,

The Senior English teacher and I are collaborating on a paper for our students which will require them to 1) adopt a Montana Tribe and relate its history and culture and 2) argue the relative merits of some aspect of reservation life, such as the reservation system, itself, gambling on the reservation, the boarding school system, etc.

Even though several teachers mentioned they were integrating ideas learned in American Studies for Educators, a few were not, “I have not incorporated any Indian studies into my classroom. It is not because the class information was not worth while, more so the fact, that I do not have a class or student population that is driven by Native American Culture.” Another teacher wrote, “My district really does not focus on Native American studies, except for Social Studies.” A new teacher to her district shared this, “When I studied my curriculum, I noticed that one prominent standard was to educate students about Montana tribes. The only resources I found to help me instruct the children were an old book, circa 1960, with Indian crafts and my archaic social studies textbook.” A similar response was, “I have not integrated Indian education in my class; it is not focused on in my school.” And another wrote, “I have not implemented any additional Native American culture into my curriculum. I foresee this being added in the spring semester.”

#### Moving Forward with Indian Education for All

Efforts are being made to meet Montana’s *Indian Education for All* state mandate. American Indian Studies for Educators is just one building block to re-energize Indian education in our state. As a result of developing this course into an online alternative, educators from anywhere have the opportunity to gain an understanding of and appreciation for American Indian people. As the instructor and developer of the course, my continuing educational journey involves reaching and supporting educators in their pursuit of integrating Indian Education for All and providing a respectful and supportive environment in which all class members can strive for continual progress.

### Conclusions

Overall, results from this study suggest that American Indian Studies for Educators provided educators in Montana and elsewhere with quality information on the topic of Indian Education for All. According to the teachers, the course encouraged them to choose teaching ideas that would lead to integration of Native American studies. The course helped them think beyond their own culture, to that of their neighbors. It challenged them to learn something new. All secondary, middle, and elementary school teachers designed outlines and lesson plans related to integration of Native American studies. They also took it upon themselves to share information learned in this course with other teachers in their districts. Even though data gathered from postings, discussions, and the questionnaire overwhelmingly suggest the positive, a number of the artifacts collected from participants suggest otherwise.

To reiterate a segment of the Indian Education for All mandate will help defend the preceding statement. As stated: every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian will be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner (McCluskey, 2002). In several of the artifacts, various teachers who lived in communities with a very low Native American population stated that they did not integrate Indian Education for All in their curriculum. They did not say that it wasn't important, just that it was not a focus in their school district. Unfortunately, some school districts with limited populations of Native Americans still do not see the mandate as a key element to their curriculum. Non-Indian students still do not learn about their Indian peers with whom they will continue to live among and work with throughout their lives (McCulloch, 2003). This disconnect can only be reduced when school-wide officials become clear on what Indian Education for All actually represents, Indian Education for "All."

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